

## A'LEVEL DANCE KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

### RICHARD ALSTON

#### Early training and background

- Born 1948 in Sussex.
- He was educated at Eton College and in 1965-67 studied fine arts and theatre design at Croydon College of Art.
- Interest in Raushenburg, who created designs for the Cunningham Dance Company, led him to see company perform. He was inspired by Cunningham's work and was soon drawn to become more involved in dance.
- 1960s, early developments in contemporary dance in London, Alston took part in evening dance classes at The Place.
- One of the first full time students at London Contemporary Dance School (1967-70), training in ballet and modern dance techniques, predominantly that of Martha Graham.
- Alston studied more 'alternative' styles such as Tai Chi and developed further interest in Cunningham technique and historical dance.
- Became clear that choreography was the direction in which he wanted to work, his first choreography being *Transit* in 1968.
- In 1970 he began to teach dance composition for LCDS and, for the next two years, created works for London Contemporary Dance Theatre.
- In 1972 Alston formed the company **Strider** of which Alston was the main spokesperson. It was an experimental company which produced over sixty works in its three-year existence.
- In 1973 Alston met American choreographer Mary Fulkerson, a dance teacher who developed anatomical release technique. Fulkerson became one of the most influential figures to shape Alston's work.
- 1975 Alston went to America to study at the Cunningham Studios. He studied a range of dance forms from George Balanchine's neo-classical ballets to postmodern performances by Trisha Brown, Twyla Tharp and Lucinda Childs.
- Returned from USA in 1977, Alston began to teach Cunningham-based classes and formed his own company, Richard Alston and Dancers (1978-80), and also made work for LCDT.

#### Influences

##### **Frederick Ashton**

- Richard Alston became interested in dance through Ballet, in particular the work of Frederick Ashton.
- He was the founding choreographer of the Royal Ballet - one of the most influential dance figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Today the Royal Ballet continue to perform some of his most notable works such as *La Fille mal Gardee* and *Symphonic Variations*.
- Ashton made his choreographic debut for Marie Rambert in 1926.

##### **Ashton's stylistic features:**

- The epaulement (the way the head and shoulders are held)
- Fleeting footwork
- Elegance
- Technically demanding content
- Mime and balletic vocabulary

##### **Robin Howard**

- 1954 he saw the Martha Graham Company perform in London and realised that's what was missing from the British dance scene.
- He convinced Marie Rambert, Martha Graham and others to become patrons of his 'Contemporary Ballet Trust LTD'.
- He set up The Place and invited Robert Cohan to become the first artistic director.
- He sold his own land and possessions to purchase the whole building and devoted his life to The Place until his death in 1989.

##### **Robert Cohan**

- Trained at the Martha Graham School. Joined the Martha Graham Company in 1946.
- Returned in 1962 for its European tour. Became co-director of the Martha Graham Company with Bertram Ross.
- In 1967 Robin Howard invited him to become the first artistic director of the Contemporary Dance Trust making him director of The Place, LCDS and LCDT- which he directed for the next 20 years.
- Cohan and Howard encouraged home grown talent such as Richard Alston, Siobhan Davies and Robert North.

##### **Merce Cunningham**

- American choreographer and dancer (1919 – 2009)
- Known for his collaboration with Avant Garde composer and life partner John Cage.
- A member of the Martha Graham Company before going on to create his own works.
- Most innovative and influential choreographer of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.
- Studied fine arts.
- Cunningham challenged modern dance in the late 1950's. Innovator of the chance method
- Cunningham developed his own unique style

##### **Features of Cunningham's style:**

- ❖ Created pieces separate from the music.
- ❖ Interested in dance for its own sake rather than dance as a narrative medium
- ❖ He used chance procedures as a means of generating both the movements and structures of his work
- ❖ Movement and music would only come together during performance.
- ❖ He incorporated the chance method into his choreography using dice/'The I Ching' to determine how the dancer should move.
- ❖ In the 1990s he used a computer program as a new choreographic approach.
- Alston was introduced to Cunningham's work in the late 1960s when he was still studying fine arts.
- Cunningham's approach to movement made a great impression on Alston, who had been taking classes in Graham technique at London Contemporary Dance School – it was here he found a way of moving which suited him in both body and mind.

**Fine art** is art developed primarily for aesthetics or beauty, distinguishing it from applied art that also has to serve some practical function. Historically, the five main fine arts were painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry, with performing arts including theatre and dance.

**America** In 1975 he left for New York in an attempt to seek out new ways in which dance development was taking shape. America was at the forefront of new initiatives and was home to some of the most innovative emerging artists of the time. It was at this point he trained at the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio and on his return two years later he worked throughout the UK and Europe as an independent choreographer and teacher of Cunningham technique.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In 1980 he choreographed his first work for Ballet Rambert, <i>Bell High</i>, and later that year he was invited to become resident choreographer for the company.</li><li>• Whilst choreographing for Ballet Rambert, Alston continued to create work independently for a number of companies and dancers including Royal Danish Ballet and Michael Clark. In 1982 he co-founded, <b>Second Stride</b> which aspired to work with artists from other disciplines, commissioning both composers and visual artists thus creating artistically integrated works.</li><li>• Alston's time as resident choreographer for Ballet Rambert and his work outside of the company during these years marked a period of prolific creativity.</li><li>• <b>Richard Alston Dance Company</b> In September 1994 he formed his own company, Richard Alston Dance Company, resident at The Place Theatre.</li></ul>	<p><b><u>Formalist -Abstract treatment of subject matter -Emphasis on motion not emotion</u></b></p> <p>Alston usually starts with structure and form of the music but might also work with themes or concepts inspired by the score. Has based work on sculpture, painting, literature and occasionally, a narrative</p> <p><b><u>Soda Lake</u></b> (1981) an abstract solo based on a minimalist sculpture of the same name by Nigel Hall. Hall's piece is a sculptural interpretation of a dry lake in the Mojave desert and the dance evokes the heat and stillness of the sculptures subject.</p> <p><b><u>Wildlife</u></b> (1984) a three way collaboration with Nigel Osborne (Composer) and Richard Smith (Visual Artist). Smith created Kites which hang in the space and rotate to create different environments within which the dancers perform. Osborne's music and Alston's choreography reflect the sharp, angularity of the kites and contrast extremes of speed in both movement and sound.</p> <p><b><u>Pulcinella</u></b> (1987) Alston felt it important to recognise tradition but also to try new things underlining his treatment of the work. Original 1920s version (Massine) looks at the older commedia dell'arte traditions within its plot attempting to modernise ballet and to include Diaghilevs integrated approach to music, design and movement. Alston continues this and he too sees the important of each feature within the work. He provides a 'fresh look' at the traditions of the past and collaborates closely with Howard Hodgkin. Both narrative and abstract can be found within Alston's Pulcinella where Cunningham's approach can be seen in the relationship between the music and movement.</p>	<p><b><u>Strong connection with the aural setting</u></b></p> <p>Music is central to most of Alston's Work. Has worked with pre-existing scores (mainly classical and contemporary), commissioned scores and even silence</p> <p><b><u>Soda Lake</u></b> (1981) The dance is performed in silence. The only audible sounds are those of the dancer's breath and of the dancer's feet on the stage surface.</p> <p><b><u>Wildlife</u></b> (1984) Alston's first commissioned score by Nigel Osbourne, which comprised of a small ensemble of wind, percussion and strings with a sound projectionist adding stereophonic effects. <b><i>The sound is very abstract and 'modern' sounding, adding to the post American modern feel of Alston's work for Rambert; work that was for an artistic audience and challenging the usual concepts of dance and art.</i></b></p> <p><b><u>Pulcinella</u></b> (1987) original music by Stravinsky. The dance is in three parts distinguished by changes in the back cloth. These three parts relate to the musical structure of the work. In general, it alternates between narrative episodes and more formal, abstract dances. Like the start of the classical Pulcinella it opens with the overture. This was done to maintain connections with classical ballet and to give the viewers of the video the sense that they were in the theatre watching it live – an unusual yet not unknown way to start a contemporary dance piece.</p>	
<p><b><u>Contribution to Rambert</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cunningham technique</li><li>• A fusion of ballet and contemporary technique</li><li>• Works with a strong emphasis on design</li><li>• A repertoire of mainly abstract works</li><li>• A belief that dance should be created for its own sake and not to support a narrative</li><li>• Inviting choreographers from abroad to make works for the company</li><li>• In 1980 he choreographed his first work for Ballet Rambert, <i>Bell High</i>, and later that year he was invited to become resident choreographer for the company. Alston held this position until 1986 when he became artistic director of the company. In 1987, under the leadership of Alston, Ballet Rambert changed its name to Rambert Dance Company to reflect the change in company style and attract an audience interested in the range of work the company was generating.</li><li>• Alston's time as resident choreographer for Ballet Rambert and his work outside of the company during these years marked a period of prolific creativity. Working with Ballet Rambert meant he had a regular group of dancers, access to larger theatres, better resources, an orchestra and the ability to develop and revise dance works over time.</li><li>• He was also given the chance to commission both a composer and designer for <i>Wildlife</i> (1984). Wildlife was an important work in Alston's career as it initiated a deeper awareness of the relative and reciprocal influences to be gained from working with music and design. It is a practice which Alston has continued to pursue, becoming a significant feature in most of his works.</li><li>• In 1986 Alston was appointed artistic director of Ballet Rambert. Work presented by the company was Alston's although he also commissioned more works from other choreographers. The administrative, planning and policy-making demands of his directorship of the company ended Alston's opportunities to collaborate on a freelance basis and left him less time for choreographic output.</li><li>• Alston's period as artistic director was during an economic recession, which hit ticket sales for dance badly. Thus, although creatively the company was developing and thriving, in the economic climate of the time this did not create a financially stable position.</li><li>• Alston's works and the repertory he had built up for the company tended to be of an abstract nature. He had an artistic vision that he was not prepared to compromise and the board of directors felt that the company repertory needed to contain work of a less abstract nature and with wider audience appeal. In December 1992, the Rambert Dance Company board members dismissed Alston.</li><li>• Later, Alston moved away from the strong emphasis on design in his works that interested him whilst at Rambert Dance Company. He explains 'I am really interested in developing further the close relationship between movement and music'. It is music which is the deepest source for Alston, and it is the way in which he corresponds the music and movement in his choreography which his most engaging for the viewer.</li></ul>			<p><b><u>Combines a range of dance styles</u></b></p> <p><b><u>Soda Lake</u></b> (1981)</p> <p>Typical of Alston's work produced during his early post-American period. Soda Lake demonstrates influential moments of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Cunningham technique</li><li>- Release based work</li></ul> <p><b>Balance and off balance</b> - Movement material in Soda Lake is concerned with going from on-balance to off-balance and allowing body weight to initiate motion. Falls of various types appear throughout Soda Lake. Alston has said of his choreography 'my work is all to do with falling'.</p> <p><b>Body weight and gravity</b> - The use of body weight is equally important whether the dancer is floor or air bound. The dancer does not appear heavy – the landings remain soft and silent – but the emphasis is not, as in ballet, on weightlessness.</p> <p><b>Contrasts in speed</b> - There is a continuous fascination with contrasts in speed- the dancer goes from stillness to rapid movement within a fraction of a second, the change of pace having an excitement resulting from its unexpectedness.</p> <p><b><u>Wildlife</u></b> (1984) Rambert's repertoire was particularly rich in terms of its design elements during Alston's directorship. Alston explored the important <b><i>collaboration with music and design in dance</i></b>. Alston's use of visual art can be seen in 'Wildlife' (1984), where he used Richard Smith's artwork as a dominant stimulus. The dancers echo the angular overlapping shapes of the oversized kites.</p> <p><b><u>Pulcinella</u></b> (1987) Alston pays homage to the genre of ballet. Keeping in line with commedia's reliance upon audiences recognising the stock characters through their different postures, gestures and costumes Alston alters each dancer's movement only slightly rather than create an individual vocabulary for each character. Typical of Alston he establishes a simple movement theme and then develops it, often to a level of sophisticated complexity.</p>

